

IGNATIAN INDIFFERENCE AND TODAY'S SPIRITUALITY

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WE DO NOT USUALLY THINK of indifference as a good thing. We accuse others of indifference when they seem not to care about something that they should care about. Indifference usually implies lack of feeling, lack of caring or apathy. Why then, in Ignatian spirituality, does the term *indifference* have a special and positive connotation? Ignatian indifference is a special kind of indifference, in which one cares very much about God and about doing the will of God. On that basis, one is indifferent to the specific circumstances of service, or to the assignment one receives, in order to follow and fulfil the will of God. There is a paradox here. One is not indifferent at all about the basis of one's indifference, which is unconditional love of God.

Indifference, in this spiritual sense, is a gift from God; indeed, it is a kind of grace. In so far as we practise indifference or try to increase it in ourselves, it is a virtue. It is a characteristic we admire in other people, especially in those who habitually place the good of others before their own preferences. They are flexible, adaptable and mature. Actions involving indifference are best practised without fanfare or demonstration, as in a family, when one family member suppresses his or her preferences in order to please another. Indifference is not weakness; it is loving deference towards another. Indeed, without this kind of willed indifference, life and order in close-knit communities would be impossible.

Imagine that a very kind old lady in your neighbourhood has asked for help on a certain Saturday morning. Ordinarily, for you, Saturday morning is a time for relaxation at home, or for getting your own chores done. But your heart goes out to this old person, and you are more than willing to help. She mentioned changing light bulbs, fixing the vacuum cleaner, probably going to the hardware shop and hoovering the carpets. However, when you arrive, someone else is doing all that, and you are

asked to mow the lawn outside and trim the rose bushes instead. Does the change of assignment matter to you very much, if at all? Probably not. As long as you are helping, you are indifferent to what it is you actually have to do. This is very much like Ignatian indifference.

Ignatian indifference is a practical necessity. Ignatius was the founder of the Jesuits, a society of priests and brothers who are ready to do anything for the cause of Christ and the Church. They are all dedicated men, but they must be assigned different tasks. These tasks, from the human point of view, carry varying degrees of attractiveness and prestige. Someone will serve as pastor of an affluent parish, and another will teach Latin and coach the tumbling team at a Catholic school. One will work in an air-conditioned university office, and another will preach to indigent people in a remote and less comfortable setting. All will work doing the will of God, bringing God's word, the sacraments and examples of faith, hope and love into action.

Ignatian indifference does not mean that we lack respect for our own gifts or lack preferences in what we would like to do. It means that our love of neighbour is based on our transcendent love of God. Just which neighbours we are helping and in what particular ways we help are a matter of indifference, as long as we feel that we are doing the will of God. We are open to a broad range of assignments and situations. This does not mean that a Jesuit, or a dedicated lay Ignatian, does not have preferences. Sometimes we receive assignments or requests for service that are good fits for our talents and inclinations; at other times, more adjustment is required on our part. A sense of humour about ourselves and our situations is often very helpful.

What lies behind the theology of indifference is the idea of doing the will of God. God has a will for each of us, and has ways of making



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that will be known to each of us. Loving God's will and trusting God's benevolence, we seek and adapt to God's will. God's grace is something we can and do experience, and we do not want to shut ourselves off from its messages and effects. Our talents may be things we can use to make money and gain attention in this world, but are we using them as God intends or as they would best serve our fellow humans? We may be missing some of the signals that God is sending us. Perhaps we can cultivate more indifference towards our own self-interest and self-importance in order to discover the will of God, which, after all, can change for us as we move through life.

We may have had a job or assignment for many years, and have done pretty well with it overall, yet now it is time for us to move on. Are we open to suggestions that the time has come to let someone else take over the job? When I retired from teaching in a California community college, one of the satisfactions that I felt came from the knowledge that I was leaving open a full-time slot for some well-deserving and competent part-time faculty member who would take my place. I took this feeling to be a blessing, and one that I could relate to the Ignatian ideal of indifference. I had liked my job teaching philosophy and religious studies, but it was a grace to be able to part with it knowing that a competent successor stood in the wings.

The reason you do something may be more important than whatever it is you are doing. For example, imagine that a mother is playing a game with a small child. The mother is not trying to win, and she may



think the game is downright silly. However, the child enjoys it and is learning from it. Mother and child are sharing time together. The mother experiences indifference on several levels. Maybe she is thinking of talking to friends on the phone or watching a favourite television programme, and might like to be doing that. But she postpones indulging these preferences. Her love for her child and for the chance, in these precious moments, to

share enjoyment with her child prevail. In her we can see the virtue of indifference.

A friend calls me and asks to meet at a coffee shop to discuss some civic project. I do not care for that coffee shop and would rather go to another one. Actually, I'm busy now and would rather not go anywhere at all. I even lack interest in the project to be discussed. But I go, just to meet my friend, choosing not to care about the specific arrangements or even about the project he has in mind. Thus, indifference enters my daily life. Do I have a supernatural motive? Well, sort of—my friend needs the company, and so do I. We just cannot always have fellowship together on our own terms. Monks regard the monastery bell as the voice of God, and respond to it immediately. Theirs must be a willed indifference to whatever project occupies them when they hear the bell calling them to prayer.

Can I be too proud of my indifference? Do I notice that I am better in matters of holy indifference than other family members or fellow religious? Is my charism of blessed indifference a point of spiritual pride to me? Am I proud because I am so self-sacrificing, or is it because I seek the admiration of others who know about the virtue of indifference, and who might think the better of me on account of it? Is there someone, perhaps, who resents my showy or even phoney attempts to appear overly accommodating? A priest friend tells me about another priest who jumps up to take calls at the rectory door during their favourite television programme on certain nights. It actually bothers my friend, as he tells the story against himself, because his zealous confrère appears so obviously indifferent to his own comforts and preferences.

So, there is a charism of indifference. Some manifest the charism more than others. A charism is given for the edification of the Church. If I can be humble enough, and hide a bit of my light under a bushel, so to speak, others may not be put off, but may be more inspired by my indifference. Like the novice who takes the smallest piece of meat or the scorched piece of toast, I may be a source of edification to my associates. Or I may influence someone greatly, whom I do not even know, if I leave them the better parking space and take instead one that is tighter to get into or further away from the shop I am about to visit. I can use my talent or flair for indifference to build up the community around me, and thus it shows itself to be a charism.

Indifference and Theology

Indifference and Apatheia

The Fathers and Mothers of the ancient Church used Hellenistic and often Stoic philosophy to augment their understanding of Christian attitudes and virtues.¹ *Apatheia* was the term used by the ancient Stoic philosophers for an authentic and complete state of the soul, or for the virtue that produced such a state of soul.² To the Stoics, *apatheia* meant complete control of the passions. The passions (*patheia* or *pathemata*) were seen by them as tendencies that led the human being to excessive desires which brought suffering and disappointment. It was best, therefore, to stifle the passions and allow them as little as possible influence over our thoughts and behaviour. The passions were often thought to be either evil in themselves or pathways towards evil, and *apatheia* was a condition of freedom from their mischief.

To modern Christians, the passions are parts of human nature and they are good, although they can easily move us towards excesses and abuses. Hence, on the Christian view, *apatheia* is not to be understood as the annihilation of the passions, but is a virtue connected with freedom from their excessive influence upon the soul. On the Christian view, *apatheia* is always combined with repentance and with *agape* or love.³ The point is to direct the passions rightly, never to eliminate them completely.

Ignatian indifference is derived only in part from the ancient Christian understanding of *apatheia*. It has to do with freedom as understood from the gospels, making choices and following the will of God.⁴ It is connected with the idea of obedience, where obedience is hearing the voice of God and harkening to the call of God's will for us in ministry and service. It is related also to the discernment process, in which a person,

¹ *Evagrius Ponticus: Ad Monachos*, edited and translated by Jeremy Driscoll (New York: Newman, 2003), 333. For Clement of Alexandria, Christ was passionless. Christian perfection was a state of passionlessness. Even so, Clement says that the perfect Christian must be worldly and superworldly at the same time. On Clement, see also Karl Rahner, 'The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 3, translated by Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1967), 292.

² David J. Melling, 'Apatheia', in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 35: '... *apatheia* designates a state of habitual self-control and tranquility undisturbed by the onslaught of the passions ...'. Or see Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 110.

³ Melling, 'Apatheia', 35: 'Apatheia is not a state of unfeeling insensibility but rather a firm rooting in God attained as the culminating point of repentance'.

⁴ Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the Theologian*, translated by Michael Barry (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 24–25. Hugo Rahner quotes Ignatius thus: 'Retain in all things freedom of spirit Keep your spirit so inwardly free that you could always be ready to do the very opposite.'

working under the influence of prayer, guiding grace and attunement to God's will, leaves himself or herself open to divine influences and instigations. Indifference and obedience are accompanied by a great trust in God and in the community of discerning partners that serve as a context for one's own discernment.

Karl Rahner

Declan Marmion discusses the topic of Ignatian indifference in his book *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith*. The subtitle of Marmion's book is *A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner*, and in it he relates 'the maxims of "indifference" and of "finding God in all things"' to Rahner's understanding of Ignatian 'joy in the world'.⁵ He describes Ignatian indifference as 'an attitude of calm readiness for every command of God, that is to say, a readiness to hear a new call from God to tasks other than those in which one was previously engaged'.⁶

With Ignatius, Karl Rahner links this blessed kind of indifference to the love of the cross. Inconvenience and irritation are sometimes the forms in which the cross makes a claim upon our cooperation. But readiness to serve means overcoming our own reluctance to take on certain challenges. God's will is not always what we would choose to do on our own; indifference and obedience go together as partners. They are the chief Ignatian means towards the goal of seeking God in all things in community, and indifference is indeed a spiritual gift for which we should pray.

In a footnote, Marmion cites an article by Rahner which equates indifference with the Pauline idea of freedom 'with regard to all the individual powers and forces in our human existence, both in our inner life and in our external situation'.⁷ Our spiritual liberty entails a freedom from selfish concerns and self-serving preoccupations. Here, for Rahner, we experience the difference between what we can grasp mentally and intellectually, and what we cannot grasp: the human person 'both dissociates him- or herself from, and becomes "indifferent" with regard to, the individual object of knowledge'.⁸ In the two poles of knowledge

⁵ Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 211. And see Rahner, 'The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World', 277–293.

⁶ Marmion, *Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 211.

⁷ Marmion, *Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 212 n. 41.

⁸ Marmion, *Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 213.

and experience, there is a basis for indifference that is etched into the very constitution of the human person. Theologically considered, this indifference is always a response to mystery, and has to do with our stance in the human condition between what is infinite and incomprehensible and what is finite and incarnational.

Finally, for Rahner and Marmion, as we seek God in all things, we experience the tension between the mystical and the prophetic dimensions of our spirituality:

The word 'mystical' refers to the aspect of the flight from the world discussed above, while the term 'prophetic' pertains to that dimension of spirituality which focuses on work and service in the world. Rahner also notes a dialectic operative here between a flight from, and an acceptance of, the world.⁹

Marmion relates this to the abiding ancient, medieval and monastic tension between action and contemplation in the spiritual life. Indeed, such concerns show up in ancient monastic discussions of the passage in scripture about the busy Martha and the contemplative Mary, the two sisters who are friends of Jesus.

But Rahner nevertheless perceives a danger in an overemphasis or misplaced emphasis on the notion of indifference. Such a spirituality might tend towards the 'rationalistic, and calculating, or cold and sceptical'.¹⁰

**Entering
wholeheartedly
into whatever
service we
perform**

The point is, as the poet T. S. Eliot wrote in *Ash Wednesday*: 'Teach us to care and not to care'. We should care very much about doing service and about entering wholeheartedly into whatever service we perform. Even so, many such services are equally beneficial and necessary, and the Church or community may need help in an area that is different from the one we are used to or experienced in. We should always leave ourselves open to change or reassignment, and resist feeling possessive of whatever role or position we take or are given while serving.

Again, we are situated in an area of tension between an exaggeration of the importance of what is only relative and temporary in this world, and an all-absorbing and enraptured devotion to the mystery of the Godhead. Between these two poles of ministry and spirituality lies the incarnational, and typically Rahnerian, sense of the identity of the love

⁹ Marmion, *Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 213.

¹⁰ Marmion, *Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 213.

of neighbour with the love of God. Where the notion of indifference is blended with a theology of the cross, joy in doing God's will and service to the neighbour, there will be a healthy and balanced notion of active and self-sacrificing indifference.

We are created for the purpose of God's greater praise and service, and the attitude of indifference exists in order to achieve that purpose. 'The challenge and task of indifference, then, is to keep ourselves open for what is greater by becoming open for the greater reality, ultimately, God Himself.' Indeed, God is always the One who is greater (*deus semper maior*), and the greater reality that we desire to serve is always God. Marmion says that this kind of indifference is 'the exact opposite of any attitude of unconcern'. At its heart is an existential ...

... readiness to develop one's own uniqueness not as a wealth to be hoarded but as a service to be shared with and for others. Hence there emerges a relativizing of all particular religious practices, devotions, and methods—God is always greater than what we know of Him.¹¹

Deus semper maior

The phrase *Deus semper maior*—'God ever greater'—goes to the heart of my own consciousness of my personal growth in faith. Nothing is wasted in my life if it redounds to the greater glory of God, to the *ever becoming* greater glory of God, and to the *ever growing* glory of God in creation. Biblically stated, God must increase, and I must decrease (John 3:30). God's glory must ever increase, and I must be the barely visible instrument of God's purposes. My intention to do the will of God is the root of my willingness to do anything at all to find and fulfil whatever God wills. The idea of indifference also suggests the degree of my willingness and the transparency I aim to achieve so that God may be made manifest in the service I offer to others.

As someone influenced by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, I am also attracted to the idea of the growth of God.¹² The growth of God

¹¹ Marmion, *Spirituality of Everyday Faith*, 211–212. And see Rahner, 'The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World', 290; *Indiferencia* is based in the realization that '... God is always greater than anything we can experience of him or wherein we can find him, [*indiferencia*] continually detaches itself from every determinate thing which man is tempted to regard as the point in which alone God meets him'.

¹² Walter J. Burghardt, *Long Have I Loved Thee: A Theologian Reflects on His Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 436. Burghardt notes his own indebtedness to Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 225–227. And see also my 'Ignatian Spirituality and Whitehead', *The Way*, 48/3 (July 2009), 47–60, at 53.

in Whitehead might be interpreted in terms of the Ignatian idea of *Deus semper maior*, and might mean one or more of several things. It might mean that God grows, increases in some way, and that God transcends God's own infinite perfection *in our direction*, so to speak, and creates for Godself a finite aspect that grows, develops and experiences in ways that share in how finite humans experience things and themselves. In this sense, God can have a personal history that interacts with the history of the world and with human beings living their own personal histories.

Deus semper maior might also mean the growth of God for me, in me and in my life. It might be more of a reference to my personal growth in Christ, in consciousness and in prayer, rather than to anything happening to God. The nature of the divine experience is a mystery to me, but the best chance I have of understanding it is to compare it to my own experience. I also know that God has become capable of human experience, irrevocably, in the mystery of the incarnation. The mystery of the incarnation continues to grow in me, in my relationships with a world of others and in the cosmic process.

To a large extent, the phrase 'God ever greater' must mean 'Christ ever greater'. Here I have the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, with his poetics of 'Christscape', to help me.¹³ I also have the writings of Teilhard de Chardin on the mystical Christic transformation of the universe and of matter itself. Karl Rahner and other theologians have developed christology in an evolutionary perspective. Accordingly, God becomes ever greater because the universe becomes ever more suffused with the ever more self-incarnating presence of God. Through the mystery of the incarnation God becomes more than God, without compromise to God's eternal and transcendent perfection.

My indifference to relative and created things grows as my vision becomes more cosmic and relational. Modern and postmodern asceticism is grounded in my sense of smallness in the cosmic scheme of events, and to my growing sense of mission and vocation to enhance the cosmic process. Smallness does not mean unimportance. My importance is given to me by the God who calls me to have a role in cosmic and Christic development. My freedom is also important in a cosmic process that creates me as I help create the cosmos, as God works silently from within, directing, sculpting and evoking the world's ever new developments.

¹³ See David Anthony Downes, *Hopkins' Sanctifying Imagination* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1985).

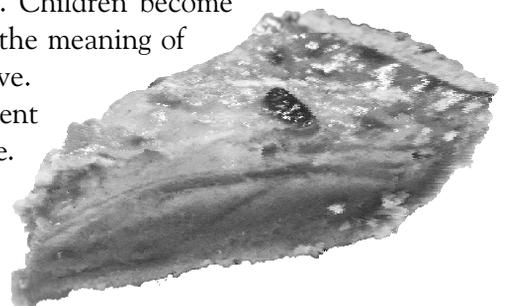
A Sense of Irony and Scientific Method

Suppose that somebody else, a friend, a rival or both, gets a job or assignment that I wanted for myself. Or it may be that I myself have a job that someone else would actually like having and doing more than I do. As long as the jobs get done, what does it really matter who does them? Then again, I know about the irony of people who get to do exactly as they want or as they planned for themselves. As things turn out, they may not be very successful, or they encounter obstacles and disappointments in their work that they never foresaw or expected. At times, God may be saving us many woes and tribulations by keeping from us positions and assignments about which we felt broken-hearted when we did not receive them.

Why can I not just feel good for the person who gets the job that I wanted? Can I lend support enthusiastically to the person who has a bigger, better or more prestigious position than I have? Given slightly different circumstances, perhaps I would have the job of my dreams and ambitions but, as things are, it falls to another's lot. What is best for the community or for the institution? If I whine or complain, I may hurt morale in general, and I will label myself as a whiner and complainer. Is something wrong with the kind of humility that would make me do my job even more thoroughly, knowing that someone else was getting the credit for it? Would I like just as well to be known as a team player, as I would a leader, superior or eminent professional in my ministry? These are questions that, as I ask them of myself, I may become more aware of the charism of indifference.

Indifference is a virtue found in family life. It is not only the ascetical novice who leaves the bigger piece of pie on the plate and takes instead the smaller one with more crust and less filling. This is also evident in the older brother or sister who is indulgent towards the gleaming desire for the best slice of pie in the eyes of a younger sibling. Indifference is present in the teenager who knows that money is scarce in the family right now, and who will not ask for cash to go to a movie with her friends. Instead, she takes her younger siblings to the park. Children become mature as they learn self-renunciation and the meaning of indifference freely assumed for the sake of love.

Would that adults were as lovingly indifferent as some children have quickly learnt to become. In the face of selfishness, even in the family, we often see unselfish acts of kindness that



are extended towards selfish people. Unselfishness is learnt by example, but some require more generous servings of this example than others in order to learn to embrace indifference for the sake of love. Indifference does not make sense except in the context of loving relationships. Obedience does not make sense except in the context of community life that is directed towards service in ministry. Maturity and authenticity are the fruits of such a dedicated indifference.

Ignatian indifference, like Ignatian discernment, involves loving care about finding out and doing the will of God. Its context is always prayer, at least indirectly. In prayer, the Holy Spirit comes upon us and grants us the freedom to choose, to choose rightly and to choose generously. The Holy Spirit brings freedom, as the power to make our choices, and as an inclination towards goodness and doing God's will. Freedom comes to us as both a personal prerogative and as a shared gift. Our personal freedom is also a gift given to the community and to the Church, by which we will choose cooperation, kindness and justice. It is only in this context, and not as an isolated attribute, that indifference can be understood.

As another example of indifference in today's world, consider the scientist who does experiments out of a passion to find a cure for some disease. Each time he makes an adjustment in the formula for a serum, he is tempted to proclaim the experiment a success and tell the world that his work has been fruitful. But he cannot do this until the experiment



truly is a success, and he must repeat his procedures and test his serum until he is sure that the cure has really been found. Beyond this, he must study the results each step along the way for side-effects and unintended consequences. The scientific method possesses a built-in component of professional indifference.

Science implies and demands a great indifference to any particular experimental result or development. One does one's work, and then steps back to measure and test the result. One expects failure, or allows for it generously; one holds in deliberate suspension the hope of success that one always has. Science and scientific method require both passion and indifference. Indifference entertains the always distinct possibility that one has failed once again, and that more work needs to be done. Ironically, success in science often involves the realisation that one more unsuccessful approach to finding the result we need has been eliminated.

All the examples given here 'teach me to care and not to care': they are instances of Ignatian spirituality. What makes them such is their compatibility with ideals of doing justice, loving our neighbour and seeking the will of God. Sometimes we pray over our decisions or follow carefully the rules for discernment of spirits, while at other times we plod along just trying to be decent citizens and companions to others. The gift of blessed indifference need not come always in a formally prayerful or consciously discerning manner. It may be present importantly in small decisions that have no obvious spiritual consequences. The manner can be quite ordinary and unexceptional. God is generous with blessings, even when we do not seek or request them. This kind of indifference is indeed a good thing!

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